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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that communication is not only the essence of being human but also a vital property of life. Writers must become socially active and play an effective role in human relations through their writing. They must also have the courage to disclose their experiences and personal feelings in spite of censure, risk, and economic privation. Examples of articles and books that effectively display the writer's social interest and concern are "All the President's Men" by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, "Muhammad Speaks" by Elijah Muhammad, "The Washington Merry-Go-Round" by Jack Anderson, and "Unsafe at Any Speed" by Ralph Nader. (TS)

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"Untapped Resources: Let the Minds of Students Be the Supreme Resource"

Session Theme

"Community Development: Involvement Through Writing"

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The Writer as a Social Actionist

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While the general theme deals with "Community Development: Involvement Through Writing," I will support a particular aspect of this theme by introducing a series of activities related to improved human relations, thus, earmarking the writer as a social actionist.

Ideally, those involved in human relations type professions, such as the media, should be taught to write and speak about their own specialities in terms that another professional will approve of and an educated layman can understand. Essentially, they need to become social actionists. Since all who are affected by the media are not educated in the formal sense, media specialists should be taught to understand human problems and needs, and to use argument and persuasion in the best interest of the community which they serve. I do not at this time believe that many skills of argumentation and persuasion can be effectively taught in the freshman composition class. Courses providing such training should be scheduled throughout the college experience.

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Why would a non-English teacher propose such a shift in emphasis? My answer is simply that I have come to accept John Pierce's position that communication is not only the essence of being human but also a vital property of life. Technological advances in communication shape society and make its members more interdependent. Our everyday communication has meaning in a much more restricted context. Pierce contends that communication can take place only between people with a common aim, a common problem, a common curiosity, a common interest; in other words, something in common that is meaningful and important or fascinating to both. Thus, communication in everyday use, as Pierce continues, is a process of adjusting, understandings and attitudes and of making them congruent or ascertaining how and where they agree and disagree.

Now, how does the writer become a social actionist? Primarily, this can be done in the following areas: Programming on the air productions that are generated from community service agencies. Morning talk shows and special features on community issues and group problems are avenues for the writer to affect consciences and to use persuasion and argumentation for the good and welfare of the people. It is my view that these types of programs along with local news programs can bring the media closer to the citizen and demonstrate accountability. There perhaps should be more time alloted to local issues in print as well as on radio and television and in films. The script preparation writers should devote their efforts toward accurate, brief and clear content material. Effective human relations can be obtained by the recognition of the fact that media personnel are also a part

of their particular community and that they have certain responsibilities and corresponding obligations. The print media can further play an effective role in human relations by publishing articles that relate directly to particular groups in the community. Supplements can be added to each edition of local publications that focus on current events within the community.

Let me reinforce Sidney Jourard's position that there is a distinction between an authentic writer and a propagandist. A propagandist seeks to transmit falsified accounts of reality to people, so that they will form beliefs and attitudes that are useful to the propagandist or to the man who pays this craftsman. The propagandist seeks to diminish people. He has a vested interest in their remaining stupid, misinformed, or uncritical. An authentic writer, continues Jourard, whether he be poet, reporter, novelist, essayist, playwright, or short story writer, seeks instead to reveal his personal experience of some aspect of the world in ways that will be understood and reacted to by mature, whole people. He discloses his experiencing in effective or artful ways with no aim other than being faithful to this experiencing. Tacitly or openly, he addresses himself to people who can be enlarged; he wants to enrich their experience. If he makes money or achieves fame through writing, it is because of the accident that, at that time and in that place, people treasure truth when it is artfully presented.

Everyone has his unique experience of the world, but some experience it with more intensity of feeling, in new dimensions, and with greater grasp of meaning than others. Hopefully, those who write will be intense

experiencers. Literature would be in a sorry state if only those who experienced the world in cliches wrote books or articles.

Jourard goes on to say that authentic writing is risky. The chief risk lies in letting other people know how one has experienced the events impinging on one's life. All that other people can ever see of an individual is the expurgated version he discloses through his action. A man's public utterances are often radically different from what he authentically feels and believes. Many of us dread to be known by others as intimately as we know ourselves because we would be divorced, fired, imprisoned, or shot.

A writer may behave in public just like a suburban non-entity and yet record his authentic experiencing in print. In so doing, he runs risks from the reactions of his neighbors, his friends, his family, and others. This is so because if he is true to his calling, that of authentic recorder and reporter of his own experience, he will inevitably show aspects of himself and his personal reactions to others and events that are not ordinarily revealed in everyday behavior. I am sure that the people in the little town in North Carolina with whom Thomas Wolfe grew up were not aware of the intensity and meaning of his experience of them, and the many lawsuits Wolfe was involved in showed some of the risks of disclosure.

A writer, if he is to be effective, should have a large and sensitive soul. Stated another way, he should be capable of "registering" more facets of the effects of existence upon him than the average person. He must also, of course, have the courage to be, that is, to disclose

his experience in spite of censure, risk, economic privation, and the like. I do not like much of what Henry Miller says about Jews, for example, but I believe that he is reporting his experience faithfully and is thereby enriching my experience, helping me to sharpen my sense of my own identity - permitting me to agree, disagree, compare, and contrast my experiences with his.

I highly recommend that you read the 1974 best seller entitled, All the President's Men by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Here is what Jack Weigel of the University of Michigan has to say about All the President's Men: "Woodward and Bernstein, the two Washington Post reporters who did more than any other journalists to dig out the full story of Watergate, now present a chronological narrative of their dogged pursuit of truth in the face of a desperate White House effort at intimidation and suppression. Although their writing style is pedestrian, their tale is so inherently dramatic that is makes for exciting reading indeed." Now, can you see the role of the writer as a social actionist?

There are many other striking illustrations of the power of the printed word since the invention of writing about 250 generations ago. One particular newspaper comes to mind. Under the religious, political and social banners, social actionist writers use argumentation and persuasion to get the word to the people. I am referring to Muhammad Speaks, the official organ of the Muslim sect. Eric Lincoln had this to say about its origin: "the early columns written by Elijah Muhammad were aimed at the less educated black reader and were filled with Biblical eschatology, numerology, and mystery. Through its writings

and social actionism, the Muslim sect is a pervasive influence in many areas of the country, and their leader, Elijah Muhammad has become the most contentious and forceful Black leader today." The method Muhammad used to get his message to the people was through a newspaper column.

Let us take a look at advocacy journalism. With some 45,000,000 daily readers, Jack Anderson's "The Washington Merry-Go-Round," carried in 746 newspapers, is the most widely read political column in the United States. According to the Current Biography Yearbook, Anderson once shared the byline with Drew Pearson, whom you all may remember. Anderson is "an investigatory reporter, an advocacy journalist, and a crusader who in his hard-hitting column, along with his radio and TV broadcasts, has exposed scandal and corruption in high places with greater regularity and impact than any other newsman in the country." The salient characteristics of an advocacy journalist seems to be industry, uprightness and zeal. Anderson as a social actionist writer "believes it is the duty of the press to prevent the government from misleading the public." Jack Anderson received the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in May 1972 for his disclosures of the Nixon Administration policy during the India-Pakistan crisis.

In an article for Parade (February 13, 1972) entitled "Why I Blew the Whistle," Anderson wrote, "For about 25 years I have tried to break down the walls of secrecy in Washington. But today the walls are thicker than ever. More and more of our policymakers hide

behind those walls. Only the press can stand as a true bulwark against an executive branch with a monopoly of foreign policy information. It has all the authority it needs in the first Amendment."

Much of the credit for the enactment of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 must go to the efforts of one dedicated young man, Ralph Nader. He has for several years waged a David and Goliath battle with the automobile industry to force it to improve vehicle design as a means to traffic safety. Nader began his one-man crusade in 1958 after he graduated from law school, brought it to Capitol Hill in 1964, and made it known to the public in 1965 with the publication of his bestselling indictment of the Detroit auto industry, Unsafe at Any Speed (Grossman). Newsweek (January 22, 1968) reported that Ralph had been brought up to "understand that working for justice in the country is a safeguard of our democracy."

Having won his initial victory on auto safety, Nader turned his attention to mounting crusades in other areas where be felt the public interest was threatened. Ralph Nader is credited with saying, "In getting the message across to the people and Congress, an excellent working relationship with the press in crucial." Reporters have learned to count on the depth and accuracy of his reports.

Newspapers were the beginning of mass communication as it exists today. When printing started, so started the invention of other

mass communication devices that changed basically an oral communicative society into societies outwardly dependent on mass communication.

Today, the media, newspapers, radio, television and films, mold, shape and reflect public opinion. While the media serves as both information and entertainment resources, it is the people who discuss what they have read and heard that determine the trend of public opinion. As the nature of our society moves from one of oral communication to mass communication and again back to oral communication, significant contributions can be made by writers who use their talents to argue for change. This to me helps communities develop. This is involvement through writing.

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